

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Washington, D.C.

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SUBJECT: Home Page Development and Maintenance	DATE: February 7, 2003	
	OPI: Office of Communications	

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1 **PURPOSE AND SCOPE**

This regulation provides policy and guidelines for the design and implementation of Department of Agriculture (USDA) organizational and personal home pages for personal access. These home pages are accessible by the public using the Internet for telecommunications connectivity, and World Wide Web (WWW) software browsers for search and retrieval services. A home page provides the public with a "picture" or entrance to the organizational unit covered by the home page. It may describe its mission, major programs, significant contacts, and links to subordinate organizations or to guidance on data or information available and how to obtain them.

The intention of this regulation is to encourage the use of innovations in software technology available in this fast moving environment, applying sufficient standardization in home page design to ensure a high-quality presentation and consistency in "look and feel" for users without constraining agencies in the way they present their material to the public. It is intended as an expression of basic policy and guidelines rather than a "how to" manual on the design of a home page.

2 **SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS/CANCELLATIONS**

This regulations supersedes DR-3430-001, dated August 10, 1995.

3 BACKGROUND

The latest electronic information technologies now make it possible to provide access to information which is well organized, easily found and retrieved, and is offered at a reasonable cost to users and providers of the information. These technologies provide an extremely effective way to communicate with members of the general public who are not very sophisticated in the techniques of using desktop computers. An additional advantage of using WWW is that it provides multi-media capabilities including sound (music, voice) and images (pictures, maps, graphics) which can greatly increase the value of the presentation; and provides links to associated documents which can be accessed merely by "telling" the computer to go there (a feature referred to as hypertext).

To achieve the desired benefits and save users from a frustrating or unsuccessful experience, it is necessary to follow a few rules in designing WWW home pages. The following are some overall considerations when planning a public Internet-based information service:

- a Limited Access Capabilities. The microcomputer and telecommunications technologies available to many users lack the speed and capacity used by the home page designers. For example, some users will have text-only read capabilities and narrow bandwidth communications.
- b Organized Design. WWW allows users to easily link from one home page to another containing related material. Links can take a user to another agency or even a home page in another country. This is one of the major advantages of the WWW approach. However, if not properly designed, users can easily get "lost" and not recognize the significance or even the originator of the information they accessed.

The body of information presented through the home pages will be put together by many people from many sources. These pages and associated documents should be highly descriptive and representative of the USDA and present a de facto picture of the entire Department and its work. An organized design of the totality of information available about USDA is critical to the presentation of an accurate, overall picture of the USDA rather than one that is piecemeal, misleading, or incomplete.

- c Worldwide Access. Home pages are public documents accessible through an international network and must be designed with the realization there will be worldwide access to them.

- d Anonymous Users. Web servers referenced in this policy provide open service to the public and must accept outside users without requiring either a local user account or password. Persistent "cookies" should not be used at Federal web sites, or by contractors when operating web sites on behalf of agencies, unless, in addition to clear and conspicuous notice, the following conditions are met:

- (1) A compelling need to gather the data on the site.
- (2) Appropriate and publicly disclosed privacy safeguards for handling of information derived from cookies.
- (3) Approval by the Secretary of Agriculture.

In addition, all Federal Web sites and contractors when operating on behalf of agencies shall comply with the standards set forth in the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 with respect to the collection of personal information online at Web sites directed to children.

- e All information under consideration for publication in Home pages must be evaluated to determine if it is Sensitive Security Information (SSI). SSI cannot be made available to the public or persons without a valid need-to-know. The owner of the data determines the sensitivity of the information and the need-to-know access based on the official duties of individuals.

4 POLICY

- a The USDA fully supports the establishment of any open information server and service which (1) supports authorized mission-related activities of the Department; (2) is consistent with prudent operational and security considerations; and (3) provides the public with easy electronic access to information about their government.

Federal agencies and employees are encouraged to maintain open communication with the public, recognizing that this brings a new level of responsibility to each employee to use this electronic forum wisely in serving the interests of the public.

An e-mail contact shall be listed on the home page.

- b There will be no charge to users for accessing any home page or associated pages on the USDA Web network. Agencies may charge for providing data or information discovered through browsing the USDA Web network, but these charges may not exceed the marginal cost of dissemination.

- c Only public information approved for public release will be maintained on the home page or made accessible through links to other Web pages. Links shall be made only to governmental Web pages, exceptions must be approved in advance by the Office of Communications' Webmaster.
- d Each home page must include a link to the Department's Quality of Information Guidelines and agency-specific information regarding how to seek correction of information disseminated by USDA and who to contact.
- e Security is a major consideration in the implementation of any open public access system. The extent to which the system is protected with firewalls and other isolation techniques must be included in the planned approach for implementing a home page. Agency security officers must be consulted in the design, implementation, and operation of home pages and associated links to other systems. See additional security references in Section 5.
- f Personal home pages are permitted for individual employees in their official capacities if the information provided relates to and supports the authorized missions of the USDA. USDA employees establishing home pages accessible by the public must follow the guidelines outlined in this regulation.
- g There are no restrictions on the use of Web servers and browser software for strictly internal, non-public use.
- h The Departmental Privacy Policy will be linked on the home page of USDA, and on the home page of each Agency/Staff Office. Agencies with unique privacy requirements, other than or in addition to the Department policy, may link to and establish their own privacy statement page and include a link to the Department policy statement.

5 REFERENCES

- a Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998.
- b Computer Security Act of 1987.
- c DR 3140-1, USDA Information Systems Security Policy
- d DR 3140-2, USDA Internet Security Policy
- e DR 3300-1, USDA Telecommunications
- f DR 3040-001, Electronic Records

- g OMB Circular A-130, Revised; and OMB Circular A-130, Appendix III, Security of Federal Automated Information.
- h Privacy Act.

6 ABBREVIATIONS/DEFINITIONS

- a Browser. Software used on the Web to look at and/or retrieve documents through links in a hypertext document. Browsers may support only line mode, full-screen, or graphics including pictures and sound. Many browsers are available with varying capabilities and for different platforms. Some browsers are proprietary and must be purchased, others are available at no cost by downloading from a server. Explorer and Netscape are examples of two currently popular browsers.
- b Dead Link. Link to a non-existent or non-operational page or server.
- c Firewall. Dedicated device (hardware and software) placed between the internal and external networks to control access and prevent misuse and abuse.
- d GUI. Graphical User Interface.
- e Home Page. Primary page or starting point reached through the URL.

The home page is described as a single document but can contain multiple screens. An organizational home page contains information about a definable organization such as the Department, an agency, or a division of an agency. A personal home page contains information related to an individual employee, such as a scientist who is of interest to the public because of his or her special expertise.

- f HTML. Hypertext Markup Language.

HTML is the standard language used to produce home page documents and links to other documents. Because this is a rapidly evolving technology, some variation exists in the versions of HTML available. Agencies need to be aware of these differences in selecting the version to use. The Department will not standardize on any single version.

- g ISSPM. Information Systems Security Program Manager.
- h Need-to-Know. The necessity for access to, or knowledge or possession of specific information required to carry out official duties.

- i Public Document. Any document or information not subject to access limitations due to national security classification, Privacy Act, or Freedom of Information Act exemptions.
- j Secondary Page. Additional pages containing the next level of detail and linked to the home page.
- k SSI. Sensitive Security Information. Any information, the loss, misuse, or unauthorized access to or modification of which could adversely affect the national interest or conduct of Federal programs, or the privacy to which individuals are entitled under Section 552a of Title 5, United States Code (the Privacy Act) but which has not been specifically authorized under criteria established by an Executive Order or an Act of Congress to be kept secret in the interest of national defense or foreign policy.

- l URL. Uniform Resource Locator.

The URL is the address of a resource such as the home page. The address syntax also defines the type of resource, as follows:

scheme://host.domain[:port]/path/filename. For example, the USDA home page URL is <http://www.usda.gov>

- m Web Page. A document developed in accordance with the HTML Web format standard.

- n WWW. World Wide Web, often referred to simply as the Web.

The Web, a hypertext-based client/server application, guides the user to the linked collection of information accessible through common browsing software.

7 GUIDELINES

- a Design Approach

- (1) A home page can represent the entire Department, an agency, a sub-organization within the agency, or a person within the agency. The design of these home pages will be hierarchical with the USDA home page linking to the agencies' home pages and each agency home page linking to sub-organizations, and those to personal home pages. The links

will go both directions. For example, agency home pages also will link back to the USDA home page. Because each home page has its own address (URL), it is not necessary to step through each level to reach the desired home page. By specifying the URL of the desired home page, a user can go there directly, bypassing those at higher levels.

The agency home page shall indicate that it is an organization of USDA by inclusion of the words United States Department of Agriculture, or U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the USDA symbol. They shall link to the USDA home page.

The agency home page shall have a link to the agency ISSPM.

The home page URL should be as simple as possible and consistent with the naming conventions specified in DR 3300-1.

- (2) The home page and secondary pages should be structured around the mission of the organization and the messages the organization wants to convey to the public. The data and information the agency plans to present must be organized and the Web pages structured to provide the user with the clearest picture of the organization. A tree structure is often useful for organizing information but, with the versatility of hypertext linkages, other organizations can be more effective.

The home page of an organization is limited to descriptions of its information resources, people, functions, or mission of that particular organization. For example, a division home page should not describe the functions of the entire agency.

The pages may link to metadata which describe the organization's data and information available to the public upon request or through direct links to the actual dataset.

- (3) Designers are encouraged to explore the Internet to review home pages of other organizations to learn what designs work best.
- (4) Agency ISSPM's and program and public affairs staffs will be jointly involved in the development of the Web site.
- (5) Home pages should be designed to support users with text-only browsers who cannot, or do not want to access pictures, other graphics, or sound, as well as supporting those users desiring full access capabilities. A home page under development should be thoroughly tested and reviewed, preferably by an independent tester using a wide variety of browsers, before release to the public.

b Content

- (1) Home pages and secondary pages should be kept simple, avoiding a cluttered or confusing appearance. A general rule of thumb is five (plus or minus two) items per list.
- (2) Only logos approved by the Office of Communications or a duly authorized agency representative should be used. Agencies that are undergoing reorganization and do not have an appropriate logo should use that of the Department of Agriculture.
- (3) Secondary pages should contain navigational aids to assist the user in returning to previous pages or directly to the home page of the organization.
- (4) Links to governmental material outside USDA should be clearly identified. Links to proprietary information or formats should have appropriate annotations. Links to large documents should note the file size, if possible, or provide a warning if it is large.
- (5) The URL of each page should appear, preferably at the bottom of the page, and the date of the last update provided where appropriate.
- (6) Each home page should include links to user forms or other easy methods, such as an e-mail address, to allow users to submit comments or suggestions on the content of the page.
- (7) The use of dead links is not permitted. When a document or document collection is not yet available to the public, the phrase “under construction” may be used on the page without a link to the page under development.
- (8) Pages shall be designed to fully display on screen set at 640 width.

c Management

- (1) Pages should be routinely updated to ensure that they are current and accurate, and that they respond to the current topics of greatest interest to the users. A “What’s New” title may be appropriate.
- (2) External links to nongovernmental or private sector information should be used only when there is an official relationship between a Departmental or agency program, such as a Memorandum of Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding, and the program of the private sector organization to

which the link is being made. The use of external links includes responsibility for the agency making the linkage to ensure that the information is current and that the external link is active.

- (3) A waiver issued by the Office of Communications is required for each link to a private sector website. The Office of Communications shall establish a notice for use during linking to a private sector website which shall be used to inform the viewer exiting the government page.

8 RESPONSIBILITIES

a Agencies will:

- (1) Establish agency policy on levels of allowable home pages, content of a given document, and internal approval procedures within the framework of this Departmental Regulation.
- (2) Consult with the Office of Communications on the development of all home pages. Register each home page and the responsible point of contact with the Office of Communications' Webmaster.
- (3) Ensure that the agency security office has approved the installation approach. Establish responsibility for the content and currency of each home page and associated secondary pages implemented by the agency and provide resources to maintain the quality of these pages. The assigned system administrator (referred to as the Webmaster) will routinely verify the integrity of the material including all links. Integrity means content has not been accidentally or maliciously altered or replaced.
- (4) Review and analyze usage reports and comments received from users to better understand outside interests in accessing agency information, and make modifications, if necessary, based on this analysis.
- (5) Make determinations of information sensitivity in accordance with NIST Special Publication 800-26, Security Self-Assessment Guide for Information Technology Systems.

b Office of Communications will:

- (1) Oversee the design and continued quality of the USDA home page including the home pages to which it links. Assist agencies in the design of the home page "look" and in defining content.
- (2) Define the information structure for all home pages and associated links

and maintain a registry of all agency home pages and responsible contacts.

- (3) Provide a listing of approved agency home pages and URL's to the ISSPM.

c Office of the Chief Information Officer will:

- (1) Provide customer support to agencies and staff offices regarding technical use of the USDA Internet Access Network; and
- (2) Ensure USDA Internet access is protected by a firewall.
- (3) Ensure the Office of the Associate Chief Information Officer for Cyber Security.
 - a Responds to requests for guidance on security issues relating to Web pages.
 - b Reviews security documentation to ensure that agency verification of security controls provided is adequate.
- (4) Provide guidance to the agency in determining information sensitivity, as required.

END